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SKETCH OF THE

LIFE OF JOHN TANNER,

A FAMOUS MANITOBA SCOUT.

A BORDER TYPE.

A PAPER READ BEFORE THE SOCIETY, APRIL 26, 1888

BY

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A BORDER TYPE.

LIFE OF A FAMOUS MANITOBA SCOUT.

An interesting Paper read by the Rev. Dr. Bryce before the Historical Society.

The Historical Society met in force last Thursday to hear a lecture by Rev. Dr. Bryce upon the life of a famous Manitoba scout. At the close Consul Taylor and Mr. C. N. Bell who presided, made some interesting remarks, and on motion of Dr. Agnew, seconded by Mr. MacMicken, the thanks of those present were tendered the Doctor for his paper which was as follows:—

Life in a new country is a strange medley. The noblest character is seen developed at times in the trials and struggles of the border, but the dark shadow of an irregular and wayward life is a far commoner thing. We are in the habit of selecting the more brilliant and better lives and of using these to "adorn a tale." We are apt to lose sight, in the course of half a century, of the shadowy and unsuccessful lives of the time, which may well serve to point a moral. It is impossible to understand the history of the early days unless we realize the very considerable influence by men of lower motive and reckless life. Many a young man of education leaves a refined home, to bury his unrequited love, or hide the shame of a dissipated life, or forget the restraints of irksome society, in the wilds of the border land. Many are known to members of our society, who came years ago to the wilds of Rupert's Land, left their refinement behind them, and have settled down, if the term is at all applicable, to be hunters, furtraders, miners, or prospectors, leading a life of alternate poverty and success at the end of a lucky or unlucky season. Many a time the borderer has made his home among the Indian tribes, taken up a semi-savage life, and realized the picture of the Laureate:—

"I will take some savage woman, she shall rear my dusky race,
"Iron-jointed, supple sinewy, they shall dive,
and they shall run,
"Catch the wild goat by the hair, and hurl their lances in the sun."

It is vain to try to understand the life of our earlier times, or gain a true historical picture of the border life without gazing at the shadows on the landscape as well as at the sunshine of what some among us call the good old days. To-night, accordingly, we shall leave the study of the Harmons, and Selkirks, and Rosses, and Ballendens, and Cochrans, and Provenchers and look at the strange and unfortunate life of John Tanner, borderer and

guide. A reference to the sketch by Dr. Edwin James, who has also laid us under obligations for his account of Major Long's expedition to the Rockies, will show that John Tanner was the son of Rev. John Tanner, a clergyman of Virginia, who following the westward tendency of the time, almost a hundred years ago took up his abode in Kentucky, settling on the Ohio river, nearly opposite the confluence of that river with the Miami. It was a dangerous time along the frontiers of the newly constituted republic. The sympathies of almost all the Indian tribes were with the British, and they continued for a number of years greatly disturbed as to their allegiance. Capt. Joseph Brant who had crossed over to Canada, with a part of the Six Nations had great influence among the western tribes and did not hesitate to use it against the American Government. Less than a century ago, Governor Simcoe of Upper Canada was blamed with inciting the Indians of the west to disturbance, and, probably deserved the charge. It was about the year 1789, that the Tanner family was startled by the cry that the boy John had been

STOLEN BY THE INDIANS.

The boy, who would appear to have been at this time about nine years of age, was gathering walnuts near his father's home when two Indians rushed upon him from the thicket. The Indians belonged to the Shawnee tribe, the same as the famous Tecumseh led. The charge of the young captive was taken by an Indian woman of mild disposition, who pitied the cruel treatment given him by his savage captors. The white settlers of the Miami were roused to secure at all hazards the stolen child, but the band of Shawnees were too swift for them and with their prey hastened northwestward—passed Detroit and sailed up the west coast of Lake Huron. The fleeing tribe were on good terms with the Ottawas who frequented the region from Detroit to Mackinaw. The little white captive attracted the attention of a prominent woman of the Ottawa tribe, who was in deepest sorrow for her son, a boy of about Tanner's age who had lately died. After earnest bargaining with the foster-mother of the Shawnee band, the Ottawa princess prevailed and he captive was adopted as the

SON OF NET-NO-KWA.

The new foster mother held the place of principal chief among the Ottawas. It is somewhat remarkable to find among war-like tribes the leadership held by a woman. A similar instance was found on the west side of the Rockies by the well known fur trader Chief Factor Robert Campbell. In this case Net-no-kwa had great powers in the district about Mackinaw. In her canoe she carried a flag, and when she came on a visit to Mackinaw she was always saluted with the firing of a gun from the fort. The princess was married to an Ojibway from Red River, and was able to defend herself with great personal prowess. On one occasion on Lake Superior a French voyageur had taken a canoe from her band. The doughty female leader by her personal authority had the canoe taken from the white man. The foster father of young Tanner died a few years after, and the Indian family with its white ward started up Lake Superior for Red River. In passing Sault Ste. Marie there was danger of the white boy being rescued by the traders at that point, and Net-no-kwa hid her son in a cellar belonging to a well-known trader, Chaboulliez, at that place. The party followed the usual fur traders' route from Lake Superior through which was long known as the Grande Portage, coming by way of Rainy Lake and Rainy River. On their way they passed Lake of the Woods, the Lac des Bois of the French explorers, Lake Minnie in one Indian tongue, but which they knew as:

PUB-BE-KWA-WONG-GA SA-GI-E GUN,

or lake of the sand hills, referring no doubt to the thirteen miles of sand dunes at the mouth of the Rainy river. Following the Winnipeg river the party reached Lake Winnipeg. Here the princess and many of her followers obtained at Bas de LaRivière, or Fort Alexander, as we now know it too great a supply of rum from the Nor'-West Company traders, and in crossing Lake Winnipeg on a storm arising very nearly found a watery grave. The party was only saved by being dashed on the rocky shore of the lake. The Red River was reached and ascended and Net-no-kwa and her followers encamped on the present site of the

CITY OF WINNIPEG.

This was in the last decade of last century. There is no mention made of any fort at this point, but it is stated there was here a large encampment of Ottawas and other Ojibways, who had come by the same route to the Northwest. Indeed the account of this Indian family making its western migration, is but a picture of what had been taking place for half a century before, and which gave the name of Saulteaux, or people from Sault Ste. Marie, to the intrusive Ojibway occupation of Red River. It is also stated that the mouth of the Assiniboine was a place much frequented by Sioux war parties.

The party next passed up the Assiniboine to the Prairie portage, still further ascended passing the mouth of the Souris, where there was at the time a fur trader's fort, and then went up the Little Saskatchewan. The Indian band along with its young captive, after hunting and trapping in this district returned down the Assiniboine, and determined to visit Rainy River district, which then as now is an Indian's paradise, for it has plenty of game, great shoals of sturgeon, and fields of wild rice. As the party came to the mouth of the Assiniboine under the cover of night they were in great fear of the Sioux. They heard an owl cry from the north side of the river, another from the opposite side in response, and a third from the east side of the Red river. These they believed to be signals from bands of Sioux to one another. They escaped by turning up the Red River and keeping in the middle of the stream. Trapping and hunting as they went they reached Rainy river in due time.

The restlessness of the Indian life is something marvellous to us sedentary Anglo-Saxons. Next the Indian family including Tanner came by a new way to the Red River. This was by what was called the "Muskeg Carrying Place," going westward from Rainy river through the swamps to the neighborhood of what is now Pembina on the 49th parallel. A trader's house had been built there. But this being a little before 1800 there were none then at that point. After again descending to the Assiniboine, the Indian band visited Portage la Prairie and the Souris, and on this occasion started to visit the Mandans on the Missouri, but turned back on the way, crossed overland to the Pembina river and descended it to the Red River again. The young captive Tanner had now grown to be nearly of age when he was married to an Indian maiden, whose name translated is "Red-sky-of-the-morning." He was also offered the chieftainship of the band but refused it. The captive had now become a noted hunter, visited the villages of the Assiniboine, near Turtle Mountains in quest of stolen horses, and had numerous adventures among the Sioux.

TANNER MEETS HARMON.

About this time, at Fort Alexandria, on the upper Assiniboine, a Fort named by the way after Sir Alexander Mackenzie, a trapper, no doubt, Tanner was met by the well known fur trader Harmon. On July 9th, 1801, Harmon writes: "This day there came here an American, that when a small child was taken from his parents, who then resided in the Illinois country. He was kidnapped by the Saut-eux, with whom he has resided ever since; and he speaks no other language excepting theirs. He is now about twenty years of age, and is regarded as a chief among his tribe. He disliked to hear people speak to him about his white

relations; and in every respect excepting his color, he resembles the savages with whom he resides. He is said to be an excellent hunter. He remains with an old woman, who, soon after he was taken from his relations, adopted him into her family; and they appear to be mutually as fond of each other as if they were actually mother and son.

About 1812 or 14 Tanner visited the

NEWLY FORMED SELKIRK SETTLEMENT

and there saw the first white woman since the time of his capture or flight to the Northwest. During the troublous times on the Red River from 1814-16, Tanner with his family was living peaceably on the Rainy River. His domestic life was very unhappy. We learn that shortly after his marriage with "The-Red-Sky-of-the-Morning" he contemplated committing suicide. About the time of the Selkirk troubles his life was so miserable that he determined to return to the United States. Other troubles also befel him, and on one occasion he had the misfortune to fall from a tree and crush his ribs. The life of the fur-traders on the whole route from Fort William on Lake Superior to the Red River and even to Fort Qu'Appelle was much agitated about the time of the formation of the Selkirk colony on Red River. This society, though its history has only extended over ten years, has done a most important work in bringing into prominence the correct view of those events, and in giving Lord Selkirk his true place in history. John Tanner became intimately associated with those occurrences. Most of us know that during the winter of 1816-17 Lord Selkirk held possession in person of Fort William while his own Fort Douglas on Red River was in the hands of the Nor'westers.

A MILITARY EXPEDITION

was sent out during the winter under the command of Captain D'Orsonnens, to take Fort Douglas, while Lord Selkirk remained at Fort William. It was a dreary journey to come on snowshoes in winter from Lake Superior to the Red River. The De Meurons, however, about a hundred strong, were equal to the task. At Rainy Lake Capt. D'Orsonnens met Tanner and induced him to guide the party to the Red River. It was important to avoid the Nor'-wester stations, and Tanner, who knew the whole district from Lake of the Woods to the Red River as well as an Indian, was induced to lead the way over the "muskeg carrying place," by which years before he had come along with Net-no-kwa's band. It took forty days to penetrate the wilderness from Rainy River to the Red River on parallel 49° N. Here at Pembina some years before the Nor'-westers had built a fort, and this was now taken without a struggle. In four days more the expedition had come down the Red River, and were within ten miles of the present site of Winnipeg. Here the party was met by old Peguis, the Sault

teaux Chief from St. Peter, with twelve of his young men. The party was accompanied by one of the well-known French half-breeds of Sault Ste. Marie, some of whom came to the Red River and are well-known amongst us. This was Louison Nolin. Tanner and Nolin were kindred spirits. They desired to have the glory of

CAPTURING FORT DOUGLAS.

With a chosen number of De Meurons they left the party behind, pushing ahead on snow-shoes, and with scaling ladders which they had made, in the dead of night clambered over the stockade of Fort Douglas, and as silently as the Greeks from the horse at Troy, seized the fort and captured the unsuspecting Nor'westers. The Nor'westers were thus beaten at their own game, and the fort was held for Lord Selkirk. In spring, 1817, his Lordship arrived at Fort Douglas, and about the same time the magistrate Coltman from Montreal to set matters to rights. Lord Selkirk made efforts to establish order, conferred with his Kildonan settlers, made a treaty with the Indians, and took his journey southward through the country of the Sioux, now Dakota, to the Mississippi.

LORD SELKIRK'S GRATITUDE.

The times on Red River were troublous indeed. The very Indians with whom Lord Selkirk had made a treaty stole his horses soon after. A Sioux escort was needed to see him safely out of the Red River settlement. Tanner was also in danger as having guided the De Meurons in taking the fort. Lord Selkirk sent him with an escort of six men back to the Lake of the Woods. Tanner had received only £20 or £30 for the work of guiding the expedition. It was represented to Lord Selkirk that he was worthy of a greater reward. Lord Selkirk became interested in the man, heard the story of his capture as a child by the Indians, and determined if possible to find his friends upon the Ohio. Tanner's recollections of his childhood were very vague, for he had now reached the age of about 34. His impression was that his name was Taylor, and his knowledge of the country from which he was stolen was quite at fault. Lord Selkirk issued a circular in the papers throughout the Western States and was successful in his search, though the name Taylor was found to be that of intimate acquaintances of the Tanner family. The following is the text of a part of Lord Selkirk's letter after finding the long lost captive's family:

LEXINGTON, Kentucky, Nov. 17th, 1817.

"The circumstances that Mrs. Taylor mentioned of his family coincide with those which he told me in the north, particularly that he had a brother called Ned, and two sisters previously married to his being carried off. Also that his father was a big lusty man, as the young man described him. The only point of difference is, that Mrs. Taylor said that Ned Tanner was

older than the boy John, who was carried away. There, I understood him to be younger, but as I could converse with John only through an interpreter, such a mistake might easily arise. Mrs. T. also said that old John Tanner had been settled in Kentucky several years before 1790, but that possibly he might have removed at that date, by the river, from some other part of the State. The young man told me that his father had changed his residence a very short time before he was carried off, and had been settled on the banks of the Ohio only about ten days when the attack of the Indians took place. He mentioned particularly his having come down the river in a large boat or float with horses or cattle. He also mentioned that at the place where his father lived previous to his removal, there was a brook running in a cavern underground where they used to go with a candle to take water."

SELKIRK.

Lord Selkirk acquainted Tanner with his discovery, and so Tanner finding the Nor'-Wester influence now hostile, and glad to see his long-lost friends, left the region of Rainy Lake, went down the lakes to Detroit, saw Governor Cass there and paid a visit to his friends in Kentucky. His brother Edward had started on his way to Red River to meet Tanner, but the two missed each other on the way, and only at length met in Detroit. On going down from Rainy Lake he had taken three of his children to Mackinaw to be educated, when he determined about the year 1823 to revisit the Northwest and take his two remaining daughters down to civilization. The Indians were unwilling that Tanner should take his children away, and the influence of his overbearing wife was great enough to incite them to prevent this. The mother insisted on going with her daughters, and the party was accompanied by a young Indian of worthless character. After leaving Lake of the Woods, in constant fear of the hostile Indian,

TANNER WAS SHOT

and severely wounded at the Maligne River. The whole party deserted the wounded man and his life was only preserved by his being picked up by a canoe going to Rainy Lake. His daughters came back to nurse him, but his wife kept herself out of sight. Major Long's celebrated expedition of 1823 of which we have so excellent an account by Prof. Keating, was at this time coming back from Red River and Lake of the Woods, and found the wounded Tanner partially recovered at Rainy River. The party had consented to take him and his daughters down the lakes to Mackinaw, but at the last moment his daughters deserted him. He however, determined to accompany Mayor Long. The journey was too severe for the wounded man and he was left behind a few miles from the entrance of the lake. Tanner spent part of his life in the service of the American Fur company, and was Indian interpreter at Mackinaw until 1823. The borderer lived an uncertain and unhappy life, however. Moving hither and thither he at last made his home at Sault Ste Marie.

He was shiftless, now as interpreter making some money, and then driven to the chase for his support. His Indian wife had either separated from him or more likely had died. Determined to rise in the world he succeeded in

MARRYING A WHITE WIFE.

The glamour that is thrown about Indian life by Fennimore Cooper has led educated and refined women to ally themselves at times even to pure Indians or natives living the Indian life. Tasse in his "Canadiens de l'Ouest," gives the account of Jean Baptiste Cadot, of Sault Ste. Marie, a rough borderer, who about the time of Catlin, the artist, went to England as a showman. Cadot brought back in triumph his educated English bride to Sault Ste. Marie, there to receive a rude awakening. Tanner did the same the thing. He succeeded in marrying in Detroit an accomplished, Christian lady. The unfortunate victim lived in his wretched hovel at the "Sault" for a year, and by the help of a few friends was secreted on board a passing vessel and carried away from her miserable abode. But little is known of Tanner's late years. The writer is indebted to the capable and obliging secretary of the Minnesota Historical Society, J. Fletcher Williams, for facts obtained by him from persons who had met Tanner.

TANNER'S SAD END.

About the year 1840 Tanner was displeased with the attentions to his daughters of a young man named Schoolcraft, brother of the well-known Henry J. Schoolcraft, at Sault Ste. Marie. Tanner threatened Schoolcraft and at length shot him. Fleeing for his life Tanner was never seen again. For years it was thought he had gone to conceal himself among the Indians of the Hudson Bay region. This proved to be incorrect, for in a swamp a few miles from the Sault, a skeleton was found, and alongside were two firearms—one a gun, and the other a rifle. These were afterwards identified as Tanner's guns. The surmise was made that in his violent flight after shooting Schoolcraft, he had burst a blood vessel and died.

CONCLUSION.

There is very little of the heroic in the life of Tanner. He was one of a type of men who have largely influenced the occupations of border life, are very influential among the Indians, but often living loose and unhappy lives. Contact with border life tends to lower men to the level of the savage. In dealing with our Indian question we shall fail completely to understand the problem, unless we take into account the large influence wielded over the red-man by the daring and unscrupulous white-men, who live upon the border. Tanner's son came back to Red River and was a sort of travelling missionary along the Red River. He was killed by falling from a wagon somewhere up the Assiniboine about the time of the Riel rebellion. The whole story of the Tanner family is a sad one.

